



An Ounce of Prevention

Building a Global Shield to Defeat Improvised Explosive Devices

By Mary Beth Goodman June 2015

Introduction and summary

Whether used by a suicide bomber, concealed on the ground, implanted in a vehicle, or remotely detonated, improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, are an enormous threat to both military and civilian populations. Their widespread use in conflict areas has resulted in innumerable deaths and injuries around the world.

Between May 2013 and April 2014, more than 15,000 IED events were tracked globally, ranging from cache finds to detonations. These events caused more than 40,000 casualties—deaths and injuries—in countries excluding Afghanistan and an additional 12,024 incidents and 11,167 casualties in Afghanistan alone.¹ As shocking as these numbers may be, experts believe that the number of IED events is underreported around the globe. IEDs are wreaking havoc around the world from the battlefields of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria to Columbia, India, Pakistan, Kenya and other locations where civilians are the primary targets.² The IED will continue to be copied, and rather than disappearing, it is proliferating.

All improvised explosive devices need basic components in order to function. While the type of explosive element might change, the vast majority of IEDs use commercial-grade materials such as fertilizer for the blast. In addition, all IEDs need some sort of detonator to trigger the explosion. Detonators and precursor chemicals are manufactured products with many legitimate and lawful uses and, therefore, are sold on the open market and shipped via normal commerce and international trade practices. Similarly, fertilizers are produced with chemicals and inputs that are manufactured and sold for justifiable and appropriate purposes every day.

While militant groups such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, use IEDs to kill and maim, they do not manufacture detonators and blasting caps. Nor do they manufacture munitions, fertilizers—such as ammonium nitrate-based fertilizer³—or other chemicals needed to make explosives. Rather, these militant groups repurpose munitions and import these precursor chemicals and detonators through facilitators or by smuggling the goods across borders, as *The New York Times* recently reported.⁴

Clearly, limiting access to these ingredients restricts their use, and efforts must be made to limit the flow of these goods to militant groups. It is essential to apply the lessons learned from battlefield experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq to combat disparate groups of militants around the globe that seek to subjugate citizens through fear and to inflict maximum harm with cheap weapons. Yet from ISIS to Boko Haram to al-Shabaab, militant groups have a seemingly unfettered ability to import or smuggle the materials necessary to make IEDs.

The United States needs to rely on the considerable diplomatic tools available, as well as customs and law enforcement efforts, to stem the flow of IED components to militant groups. Despite significant military expenditures, the United States cannot defeat the threat of IEDs alone and needs to ensure that international coalitions and multilateral partnerships are utilized. Specifically, a multilateral partnership called Program Global Shield that is tasked with halting the illegal international flow of chemicals used for making IEDs should be reinforced and its mandate expanded in order to truly have a “comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy,” particularly against ISIS.⁵ As part of a broader counter-IED effort, a global coalition of customs and law enforcement experts urgently needs to strengthen cooperation and enforcement of regulations in order to stem the flow of precursor chemicals and detonators to militants. Rapid action to quickly expand the mandate for Program Global Shield could draw upon information from the global trading system and provide an effective tool to help combat ISIS and other militant groups across the globe.

The United States will spend approximately \$500 million from one portion of the U.S. Department of Defense budget in fiscal year 2016 to combat the threat of IEDs, yet the \$5.9 million multiyear global project that counters the illicit diversion and trafficking of precursor chemicals used to manufacture IEDS is set to expire at the end of 2015. The United States and the international community must use all available tools to counter the immediate threat of militant groups. Together, they must recognize that nonmilitary efforts can be effectively deployed to counter the use of IEDs—as long as bureaucracy does not get in the way.

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